

Dr. Evelyn Farkas
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
Press Briefing
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Ambassador Cekuta: Salam, I am really pleased that you're here tonight and actually very pleased to introduce my colleague, a good friend and very active person who has been working on things in Azerbaijan from the Pentagon, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Dr. Evelyn Farkas.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Farkas: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador. My name is Evelyn Farkas for those of you who don't know me I am responsible for being the senior advisor to Secretary of Defense Carter on Russia, Ukraine, the Black Sea area, the Caucasus, as well as the Western Balkans.

As the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense with special responsibility for the Caucasus region I'm very happy to be back again in Baku today. I've been here many times now and one of my favorite things to do is to go running on the Bulvar, and I was able to do that again today. But I learned that you're going to expand it and make it even longer, so I'm going to go into fitness training so that I can run the whole length.

The next thing on my agenda after getting my run in was to meet with senior officials from your Ministry of Defense, your Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as your presidential administration. We discussed our bilateral defense relationship and continuing cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

Azerbaijan remains a strategic partner for the United States and we are very proud of over 20 years of security cooperation together. Azerbaijan was among the first countries to suppress support for the United States following the attacks of September 11th. We are grateful for that. We will never forget it. And since then, Azerbaijan has gone far beyond those initial expressions of unity.

Azerbaijan has contributed to peacekeeping operations with Azerbaijani troops working side by side with U.S. and NATO forces to give Afghans the chance to

develop a peaceful, stable democracy. Azerbaijan has also facilitated the transport of logistical supplies in support of these NATO operations in Afghanistan. And Azerbaijan has cooperated closely with the United States to cut off support for extremist organizations.

In turn the United States has provided assistance to the Azerbaijani government to enable it to better protect its borders and stem the flow of terrorist extremists transiting through the country. The United States remains committed to supporting Azerbaijan's ability to operate with NATO forces as part of multinational coalitions.

The United States also provides assistance for many of the internally displaced persons of Azerbaijan through almost \$2 million in humanitarian projects throughout the country.

Our U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is at the heart of many of these projects such as water wells and school construction.

So if I could summarize I would say today's meetings were friendly and productive and will advance our bilateral relationship.

I look forward to your questions.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. Hello. My question will be about what is the status of U.S. support to Caucasus republics, namely Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia with regard to the ISIS threat?

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Farkas: As I mentioned in my statement, we are already working very closely with the government of Azerbaijan to counter extremism. Of course we're working in Afghanistan to help them have a government that is stable and democratic, but we are also working, as I mentioned, to counter extremism here in the Caucasus. We're doing that as well with the government of Georgia. And we of course continue to consult with the government of Azerbaijan about how we can increase that cooperation. But it's a very healthy relationship and it's an area that we're quite proud of in the United States.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. First, I'm glad that you like fitness just like me.

The question is, recently there were speeches and statements against Azerbaijan in the United States. Could you please elaborate, how do you think these speeches and statements, what kind of impact they made, they are going to have on U.S.-Azerbaijani relations?

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Farkas: Thank you for your question.

First of all I want to say that I am here to say that we have a very strong bilateral relationship with Azerbaijan. We are very proud of our bilateral defense relationship that goes back 25 years in lots of areas including I mentioned the counter- terrorism, deploying to NATO operations including Kosovo and of course Afghanistan. We're continuing to help Azerbaijan become interoperable so that Azerbaijan can deploy in many other operations. Then of course we continue to cooperate on maritime security and a whole host of other issues. And we're looking at where we can continue to do more cooperation and increase our cooperation.

The relationship with Azerbaijan is very strong. There of course are always different opinions with regard to our relationship and the media in the United States is quite robust, as you know. We have a lot of views and they get expressed freely, but our government has our own position which is that Azerbaijan is a strategic partner and it will always be a strategic partner, and we work very closely with the government and have the highest respect for their sovereignty and for their policy in terms of, of course, my area which is the defense relationship.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. I would like to ask, I think the unresolved conflict in the region, is also there among the challenges of the security of the countries. So how does U.S. see the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other unresolved conflicts in the region? Thank you.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Farkas: Thank you for your question.

For the Department of Defense and the U.S. government indeed writ large we are deeply concerned about the unresolved conflicts in the region. I work every day

on the unresolved conflicts in the region, whether it's the one here in the region or Georgia's problems with their occupied territory as well, or with the situation in Ukraine or Moldova, for that matter. There's a long list. And unfortunately many of these conflicts have one thing in common, so we must make sure that when we have a policy towards these conflicts that we are smart and strategic. And I think if anything the United States is seized with the need to be more active, to be more creative, to try to help the people of the region here to come to a fair and just resolution on their international law.

Because at the end of the day as the conflict in Syria and the current flow of refugees to Europe reminds us, these conflicts are about people. They affect people and we owe it to those people to work energetically every day to try to bring them a better future.

And if you'll permit me a little personal note, I feel this personally because my parents were refugees who fled their homeland and resettled in the United States. So it is something that we work on all the time, but we're always open to suggestions including from our Azerbaijani partners. So we did discuss the issue of the not-so-frozen conflict in your immediate area in Nagorno-Karabakh with the Ministry officials today.

Press: May I have a follow-up question? You mentioned that all the conflicts have something in common. What is it?

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Farkas: Certainly use of force and let's just say diplomacy that hasn't been effective thus far.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. First maybe you know that Azerbaijan was the first country among former Soviet Union that kicked the Soviet Russian armed forces out of the country during the period of term of office of former President Elchibey. Now there was an article published by *Stratfor* stipulating that Russia is going to bring back its armed forces, peacekeeping forces to Nagorno-Karabakh on the perfect veneer of peace-building measures. What kind of support can U.S. and Washington provide or thinking to provide in order to prevent that?

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Farkas: I have seen this report but I don't know that it's anything more than speculation so I don't want to speculate about something that's not happening to my knowledge. But Russia is part of the Minsk process which is a transparent process that also involves the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia, so I would expect that whatever they might have planned for the future they would do transparently and in consultation with all of the Minsk parties, all of the Minsk governments.

Thank you very much.

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